

A POLEMIC ON CONCEPTS, VALUES, DUSTBINS, UNRULY SUBJECTS AND SUBMISSIVE CITIZENS

***By 'polemic' I mean a vigorous argument that eschews
contrived balance.***

Agreement is not required.

In 1962 Bernard Crick published *In Defence of Politics*ⁱ. The belief that politics is about the inclusive discussion of and arrival at public values needed to be articulated, asserted and defended. It still does. Fifty years after Crick's book Mathew Flinders, a successor of his at the University of Sheffield, published *Defending Politics: why democracy matters in the twenty-first century*. It seems that every so often someone has to defend the notion of politics. Participatory democracy began to shrink for us in 1979 with Thatcher and from 1997 Blair tried to do government without politics. Instead he gave us Michael Barber's *deliverology*ⁱⁱ.

I drafted the last GCSE syllabus in Politics and devoted one quarter of it to how governments were held accountable to the people. Tony Blair and New Labour stood accountability on its head and tried to performance manage the country; educators in particular were made accountable to government. Remember Barber's book *Instruction to Deliver* (2007) with its picture of a target on the cover? For me it is so depressing that journalists and politicians of all parties think that Barber set the model for how government should be doneⁱⁱⁱ.

In 1971 the Politics Association was formed by and for, mostly, teachers of politics from every phase of education. Back then Government and Politics was a very popular subject. Bernard was a member of the Association's Executive Committee. I was on that committee from the outset for ten years. With Alex Porter, Bernard also edited the report of the Political Literacy Working Party (1978)^{iv}. Before becoming an academic Alex had taught in a VIth Form College but as the only schoolteacher (secondary modern) in both groups I sometimes felt disconnected from what seemed to me to be the ethos of a largely male senior common room theorising about a distant reality.

For Crick concepts were paramount. Teaching, however, in an area of very high unemployment I suggested to him that kids needed to know and understand how to make the 'system' work for them, even to change it. He replied that they could get all that from reading the Guardian!

Yes, I did feel all this as an issue of social class bolstered by networks of the well connected. Unlike Bernard I could not casually mention that I might

resolve an issue by, for example, 'having a word with Shirley' (Williams, that is). He really irritated me when he did that sort of thing.

Some years later, as a Chief Examiner for CSE Government and Politics working in a group to decide what GCSE Government and Politics would look like, I found myself arguing with the Chief Examiner for A-Level Sociology. Probably unfairly, I said that when a student of his was arrested he wanted them to be able to see this as the concept of social control at work; I, on the other hand, would want my kids to know who to phone.

Fred Ridley^v who taught me often said that it helped democracy to work if you knew who to phone up when your dustbins were not emptied. I do not dismiss teaching through and about concepts. It is stimulating, fun and important to throw, for example, the concept of 'fairness' onto the table and to ask what it might mean and how it might be exemplified. It is not a concept to be confined to the abstract.

Fred always said that politics was about values. That did not stop him seeing how important it was to know about public administration. But which should come first, concepts, values or policies and the dustbins?

My brother Trevor was a (mainly) local government politician. I once questioned him on policies.

"Its not policies that are important", he said, "its values. They are the difficult part. If you get them sorted and agreed the policies will follow. They are the easy part."

So, thanks to Bernard for reminding me of the meaning of politics; to Fred for linking dustbins and values; and to Trevor for telling me which comes first.

As for Citizenship

I remember being challenged for writing that we are not citizens but subjects. Was I pinching someone else's phrase? I looked it up. I was not the first. There is a chapter heading in *Mein Kampf*, 'Subjects and Citizens'. So I read it. It was gibberish. But I still think we are more subjects than we are citizens. And I am very sceptical about the desirability of being a citizen inside what passes for the UK's current body politic.

I spent so much of my early professional life trying to get rid of subjects of study called 'civics' and 'citizenship' and 'British Constitution' because I felt they induced docility and deference. Over the years they were replaced on the timetable by 'government and politics'. So I was disappointed that Bernard appeared to set aside all the work done on political education to turn back to citizenship. It felt like switching from Capstan Full Strength to Silk Cut Extra Mild.

It goes back to Kenneth Baker whose National Curriculum squeezed out Government and Politics and substituted weak citizenship as a theme that might be nodded at in passing by schoolteachers, if they even noticed it^{vi}. Bernard had taught Blunkett^{vii} who gave him the task of reporting on citizenship. The Report was published in 1998^{viii}. Blunkett once came to a Politics Association Conference, as did Keith Joseph who had read almost everything we produced and did his puzzled best to engage with it.

For a while I thought we had it cracked, especially with the publication of the Political Literacy Report but one year later Thatcher became prime minister and over the next few years the movement lost momentum. The Fat Cats of the Curriculum were those subjects on which schools and colleges were inspected. They dominated the timetable. At the same time, what we used to call alternative curriculum and assessment strategies became sidelined: they did not help with inspection: they were not easily measurable^{ix}.

Recently we have seen out and out interference in the Politics A-Level syllabus by Nick Gibb, the Schools Minister. Not only was feminism demoted out of sight but also his list of political thinkers contained only one woman, Mary Wolstencroft. His interference was fought off by a campaign but why was it necessary to have to counter him? Why did he feel entitled to control how young people would perceive and engage with political issues and only those issues chosen by him?

In Theresa May we have a prime minister whose first Brexit thought was to reach for the Royal Prerogative. We have a Leader of the House with no notion of how proposed legislation needs to be scrutinised. And we are still missing all those civil servants successive governments got rid of, to be replaced far too often by profit making consultancies^x.

Perhaps it's just me but I don't enjoy being classified as a citizen within a regime that sees me not only as a subject but also as a commodity.

I would rather be an unruly subject than a deluded, submissive citizen.

Cliff Jones

4th November 2017

Endnotes

Possibly the most powerful part of Crick's very short book is its title.

ii

'Deliverology' was probably invented as a term to make fun of Barber but he has willingly adopted the word to describe his approach to government.

iii

New Labour was all about setting people targets, telling them to hit them, inspecting to see if they had hit them and then applying sanctions if they had not. The people were not invited to question the wisdom of those targets.

In the field of education Barber had no qualms about describing educators as 'instructors'. He must have known that word was anathema to British educators but it was essential to his approach to government. Civil servants enduring presentations by Barber underwent torture by flow chart and power point.

iv

Perhaps, as the biographer of George Orwell, Bernard might have noticed the irony of holding the final meeting to approve the Political Literacy Report in what Orwell had chosen as the Ministry of Truth of *1984* fame.

We sat in the Senate Room of the University of London with the mummified body of Jeremy Bentham outside in a sort of sentry box on wheels. Derek Heater who was at the meeting told us that as an undergraduate it had been his job to wheel the old man in in order to fulfil the requirement that he be present at every meeting of Senate.

Our longest discussion arose from the use by Alex Porter of the word 'democratic' to describe a school. The discussion illustrated for me the largely male ethos of a senior common room. The word 'esoteric' comes to mind. The question was raised about the appropriateness of that word. Could it be used? A simple question, easily resolvable you might think but not for political scientists. We had to decide if we were empowered to decide. But before deciding that we had to decide how we would decide. Eventually, all this was sorted and many of us sat back to breathe collective sighs of relief; until, that is, it was pointed out that all we had done was to decide that we were empowered to decide: now we actually had to decide. Having spent much of the discussion doodling and attempting to decline Crick as a Latin noun, Crook, Crank, Crick and so on, I have no memory of the actual decision.

https://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Political_education_and_political_litera.html?id=NeolAAAAMAAJ&redir_esc=y

v

As Professor of Political Theory and Institutions in Liverpool Fred was particularly interested in how government, public administration, operated in different countries. He was a member of the Politics Association and was prominently involved in job creation schemes in Liverpool at a time when, to coin a phrase, unemployment was a 'real and present danger'. He believes in participatory politics.

vi

In the run up to the introduction of the National Curriculum Kenneth Baker travelled the country to tell us what he was about to give us. At one meeting I asked the first question:

"How do you reconcile two contradictory ideas in what you propose? On the one hand you are differentiating schools so that we have different kinds of schools for different 'kinds' of children but on the other hand you are making uniform what is taught and how it is assessed."

In reply he said, "That is a very interesting question." Then he waffled for several minutes.

In reality he was devising a means of stratification.

He was also challenged on how he would maintain previous commitments to Career Education and more, including political education. It may be my imagination but when he said that they would become 'themes' it sounded as though he had plucked the word out of the air to avoid embarrassment. When the National Curriculum arrived it came with Themes, Dimensions and Skills. I designed a Mode-3 GCSE that covered many of them (more on that at ix below).

vii

Possibly the first disappointment delivered to professional educators by David Blunkett in 1997 was his decision to keep in post as boss of Ofsted, Chris Woodhead. Not only did Woodhead wish to return to traditional methods of teaching but he was also particularly nasty doing his job. Inspection could have been a support for the profession. Instead we got educational traffic wardens.

Blunkett is a qualified professional educator (post-compulsory) and when he attended the Politics Association Conference was regarded as a serious socialist. I spent a long and enjoyable time arm in arm with him looking for his guide dog. I do not understand how or why becoming an MP and a prominent member of Blair's cabinet coincided with him becoming so right wing.

viii

Among the detail in this report I could criticise the absence of people such as R. Stradling and M. Noctor who were not only experts in the teaching of 'Controversial Subjects' but had carried out the first review of the knowledge of politics possessed by young people in schools. Alex Porter told me that he had all of their original research. It was not used.

Another absent voice was Denis Lawton who in 1975 wrote *Curriculum, Class and Culture*. He too wanted a national curriculum but one that emerged from professional examination of social values. He had been very much involved in the Political Education movement.

As for Active Citizenship, an idea propounded by MacGregor when he was Secretary of State for Education, I was present when he introduced it at a conference. It sounded as though in compensation for Thatcher telling us that there is no such thing as society we were to be given National Bob a Job Week.

Possibly the strongest indicator of the values underlying the Crick Report was the involvement of Kenneth Baker who had done so much to confine and constrain education into something simplistically measurable. Young people were required to learn only that which was officially approved and were tested (not assessed in the sense understood by educators) and scored within a tight framework. I believe it was David Hamilton who said that schooling is what we do to horses.

For me the notion of Citizenship alongside this instrumental version of education denotes its use as a quietener: a damper down of unorthodox thinking. If you are good children you will get a story before going to sleep.

Here is a link to the report.

<https://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/resource/advisory-group-citizenship-report-crick-report>

ix

Mode-3 was originally a form of CSE in which teachers could write their own syllabus, examination paper and mark scheme, subject to approval by an examination board and to examination by an external moderator. When GCSE began some Mode-3s were approved by examination boards to be carried over. It was also possible to obtain a fully national level of approval under Section Five of the 1988 Education Act.

I had left school teaching to work as an LEA advisor on alternative curriculum and assessment strategies but maintained strong links with my last school. Unemployment was

extremely high. Factories were closing and the docks needed fewer and fewer people. One response by local people was to build what was then the biggest housing co-operative in Western Europe. In support of the community I designed for national approval a Mode-3 GCSE. Young people from the school were sitting on committees with architects, priests, parents and others, making decisions about the kinds of houses to be built based upon, for example, demographic trends. The GCSE course work and examination paper were designed to enable young people to critically reflect upon experiences like this.

Gradually other schools and communities were adopting the syllabus. What happened next? Government closed it down. It was not simply that alternative approaches to curriculum and assessment were not easily measurable: they did not fit into the approved concept of society. They accredited the different. All of this was well before Crick's 1998 Report and is one reason why, for me, substituting Citizenship for Political Education is like giving up Capstan Full Strength for Silk Cut Extra Mild and not inhaling.

x

As I write it has been announced that Brexit has made government realise that it needs an extra eight thousand civil servants. Does it imagine that eight thousand potential Humphrey Applebys are waiting in a queue at the Labour Exchange ready to start work next Monday?